Classifying the Buddhist ethical system

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One way to understand any system of thought from another culture is to draw comparisons with related systems of thought in one's own culture. Several authors have attempted to assimilate Buddhist ethics to some system of Western ethics, with mixed results. One problem is that this kind of assimilation tends to exaggerate similarities and gloss over fundamental differences; in other words, assimilation is an attempt to say that Buddhist ethics is similar to Western ethics when, as we shall see, this is really not the case.

Assimilation with Western systems

In his *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, Peter Harvey[1] makes a thoughtful attempt at assimilation. He believes that Buddhist ethics can be considered an instance of virtue ethics, centred on the idea that the basis of morality is the development of good character traits or virtues which, in Aristotle's system, for example, include intelligence, wisdom and the ability to discern between good and bad. Acting ethically is not merely a question of 'what should I do?' but more importantly a question of 'how should I be?' The Buddha did not place the emphasis on the idea of doing one's duty but rather on becoming a kind, compassionate and wise person, and then acting accordingly.

In addition, he argues that the Mahayana idea of skilful means is similar to Christian situation ethics because it allows ethical principles to be overridden in certain situations in the name of wisdom and bodhichitta. Situation ethics was developed by Joseph Fletcher in 1966 in his book of that name and has become a prevalent view within the Protestant churches. Fletcher claims it offers a middle way between the extremes of legalism or divine command theory on the one hand, for which there can be no exceptions to the rule, and antinomianism on the other hand where there is no foundation at all with which we can evaluate our morality.

Situation ethics does not propose rules, but rather suggests a guiding principle to decision making – that principle is love. Acting morally means acting in the most loving way in any given situation. Rather like the approach of skilful means or *upaya* in Mahayana, situation ethics does not ignore or reject traditional values but is not bound by them. Harvey acknowledges there is a difference, though, because in Buddhism only very advanced bodhisattvas are permitted to break with the traditional values, while situation ethics can be applied by anyone with a loving heart.

Another possible way of classifying Buddhist ethics in Western terms is by relating it to soft determinism. Soft determinists tread a middle path between the hard determinism of philosophers such as Hobbes,

[1] Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics,* Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Hume and John Stuart Mill, who assert that the law of cause and effect is universal and for whom, therefore, moral freedom is not really possible, and the libertarians who hold that uncaused, unconditional choices are possible and that free will exists. Immanuel Kant, for example, believed that free will was essential for morality. To resolve this debate, A.J. Ayer advocates a type of soft determinism which accepts that everything has a cause, but which defines particular actions as free volitions. An action is considered to be a free volition provided that: (a) if you had had the volition not to do the action, you would not have done it and (b) nobody compelled you to do it. For Ayer, we have responsibility for our volitional actions.

In order to explain the difference between phenomena that are caused and free volitions, some soft determinists distinguish between the internal and external causes of an action, for instance between its circumstantial and psychological causes. It can be argued that, while the external causes are determined, the psychological causes are not always so. This is similar to the view of Nikaya Buddhism which states that physical objects and circumstances are always determined through causes and conditions, that some mental decisions are determined both by physical and physiological causes and by psychological ones, and that certain mental thoughts or decisions are free to the extent that one has conquered one's own mind.

Buddhist ethics on its own terms

In his recent book entitled *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration*[2], Jay Garfield points out the flaws in trying to classify Buddhist ethics along Western lines and he argues that Buddhist ethics needs to be taken as a unique system on its own terms.

Garfield's analysis of the mismatch between Buddhist ethics and any Western ethical system shows that Buddhist moral theory is neither purely consequentialist nor purely aretaic, nor purely deontological. Each kind of evaluation is present, but there is no over-arching concern for a unified form of moral assessment. From a Buddhist perspective there are simply too many dimensions of moral life and moral assessment to admit a clear moral theory because interdependence is so complex. The Buddhist theory of karma does pay attention to both virtue and consequence: to the impact of my actions on my own character, and to their impact on myself and others, and whether the action promotes general well-being. But these are not fundamental dimensions of assessment. In Buddhism, moral assessment relates to progress or lack of progress on the path to the understanding of reality and the alleviation of suffering.

Whenever consequentialist reasoning is found in Buddhist texts, it does not involve any calculus of pleasure and pain, with pleasure taken to be intrinsically good and pain to be intrinsically bad.[3] In fact, pleasure is a source of suffering in much Buddhist thought, and pain can sometimes be a good thing if we can learn and grow from it. Pleasure is not seen as either a source or even a component of real happiness, understood as release from suffering; instead, pleasure and attachment are the root of suffering. It is therefore difficult to classify Buddhist ethics as consequentialist in the Western sense. Furthermore, a

[2] Jay L. Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration,* Oxford University Press, 2022.

[3] Garfield, p.20.

utilitarian reading of Buddhist texts will suggest that only the consequences of our actions matter for moral assessment, but this fails to capture the structure of Buddhist thought.

While Buddhists share Aristotle's emphasis on virtuous character, there are deep differences in their respective understanding of human nature. In Buddhism, attachment and aversion are two of the three Mental Poisons that are the fundamental causes of suffering while for Aristotle they are highly valued in some contexts. In his *Nicomachean Ethics,* for example, Aristotle discusses the situations in which he considers anger to be morally acceptable. While Buddhists accept the need to express disapproval of injustice, inhumanity and so on, they never consider anger an appropriate way of doing so.

Garfield distinguishes two main dimensions of difference between Buddhist ethics and Western moral theory. The first is the focus on input rather than output (see below), a focus on the transformation of our experience rather than on behaviour *per se*. And the second dimension of difference is the distinction between autonomy and interdependence as metaphysical foundations for understanding ethical agency.

Let's summarise the main points of difference identified by Garfield.

- Buddhist moral thought takes interdependence or interbeing as seriously as most Western philosophy takes individualism.

- Many Western moral theorists take individualism for granted, and agency is taken to reside in individual actors, with an attendant focus on moral responsibility, rights and duties. In Buddhism, agency is not taken as a primary moral category, in the sense of a unique point of origin of action in an individual self. Instead, action, intention and the results of actions and intentions, are often seen as causally distributed.

- In Western discourse, what is in one's interest is taken to be an individual matter. In Buddhist thought, interest is seen as a shared phenomenon. As a consequence of interdependence, my interests are intrinsically connected to your interests, and to the interests of everyone everywhere.

- Interdependence is a web of relationships that is multidimensional, comprising different kinds of causal relations as well as relations of mereological dependency, and dependency on human conventions and conceptual imputation. The complexity of interdependence is one of the principal reasons for the untidiness of Buddhist moral discourse.[4] This is why its ethics resists easy systematization.

- Buddhist ethics is not primarily concerned with how we act in the world, but with how we see the world in which we act: actions are important but secondary, flowing from moral vision. The cultivation of wisdom therefore lies at the heart of ethical development.

[4] Garfield, p.3.

- Western ethics is dominated by "output ethics" while the focus in Buddhism is on "input ethics."[5] By output ethics, Garfield refers to systems where the primary concern is what we do – or at least the reasons for action. Buddhist ethics, by contrast, is concerned with what and how we experience, and how we respond to that experience affectively. Buddhist ethical practice aims to facilitate a transition from being reactive to being responsive.

- It follows that actions can only be indicative of moral excellence, or of its absence. Moral excellence itself is constituted by the way one sees the world and oneself in it, and it may manifest in one's actions.

- In Buddhism, moral agency is not associated with freedom from causality, as in the Augustinian meaning of free will: the ability to cause our actions with no previous causes determining them. Instead, Buddhism proposes an account of action as always determined by a range of causes and conditions. So, for example, another person's anger is seen as caused, not as freely adopted.

- In Buddhist thought, there is no limit to the domain of the ethical. The path is not grounded in any distinctions between the obligatory, the permissible and the forbidden; between the moral and prudential, between the public and private, or between the self-regarding and other-regarding. Instead, there is a broad indication of the complexity of the solution to the problem of suffering.

Garfield concludes that one cannot rightly take Buddhist moral theory as a species of deontological ethics, or as a species of consequentialist ethics as these appear in Western thought, despite genuine kinships with each. Instead, Garfield speaks in terms of moral phenomenology.[6] By this he understands an approach to ethics in which the principal object of concern and of moral evaluation is the way one experiences the world, including oneself, other moral agents, and especially other moral patients. This contrasts with assessing dispositions to act, motivations for actions or the consequences of actions as basic moral goods, or with exclusive focus on an agent's own well-being. Ethical growth is not fostered by instilling a sense of duty, nor by teaching people to focus on the consequences of their actions, nor by accustoming them to do particular things. Instead, moral cultivation in the Buddhist tradition, and especially in the Mahayana traditions, essentially involves training people to see themselves and others in a better way, that is, a way that is more aligned with reality.

[5] Garfield, p.29.

[6] Garfield, p.21-22.